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Egypt's media quagmire worsens



Joel Simon is the executive director of the independent, non-profit, New York- based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), which takes its name quite zealously. Wherever in the world journalists are being harassed, arrested, beaten up, or killed, as has happened with some regularity in the Philippines, Mexico, Iraq, Lebanon and on occasion here in Egypt, the CPJ reports on it. The body then lodges complaints with the responsible authorities and with concerned global bodies like the U.N. The CPJ covers a wide range of incidents, be it violence that occurs during street protest or journalists who become the victims of a hit job (as happened at least once under the Mubarak regime).

The CPJ has been closely reporting on such incidents in Egypt over the past two years and with increasing frequency since the Presidential elections in 2012. One could describe this crisis as one of rising tension between the increasingly authoritarian way in which the government is dealing with the Opposition press on one hand, and the increasingly aggressive tone and irresponsible reporting by much of the independent press , which mostly supports the Opposition.

Two events brought these tensions to a head over the past two weeks. The first was a brief but very nasty Salafi -organized (but with Muslim Brotherhood youth participation) blockade of Egypt's Media Production City. Blockaders attacked journalists and their guests coming in and out of the media center and no security forces were on hand outside the center on the first day to prevent these attacks. But when the blockaders tried to break into the media center to trash the studios of several independent channels, security forces within the center fought them off.

National scandal

It didn't last long because the blockade was a national scandal and was embarrassing to the government since Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and/or government spokesmen had condemned opposition protesters for imposing a blockade on the Cairo headquarters of the MB only a few days earlier. The MB headquarters had already been trashed by opposition protesters a few months ago - a relevant bit of background generally unmentioned except by the global news agencies. Someone intelligent and

The other event that steamed up local and international media was the brief arrest, for five hours of interrogation, of the madly popular satirist Bassem Youssef (popular at least among Cairo's residents and presumably the folks in Alexandria). "Everybody" (including the American satirist Jon Stewart) describes him as "Egypt's Jon Stewart." Youssef mercilessly lampoons well known political figures, but in particular Egypt's President Mursi. Now CBS News (a personal disclosure—I worked for NBC News for more than ten years and CBS News was our mortal enemy) provided its mostly American viewers and readers with this insight: "But being 'Jon Stewart' in a country . . .where leaders are unaccustomed to being made the butt of jokes" is very dangerous. A misleading insight - I have lived long enough in Egypt to have stored away in my memory some of the incredible jokes ridiculing Gamal Abdul Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Husni Mubarak. And Nasser is reported to have laughed at some of them when they were conveyed to him by state security. The point is -these great jokes, ridiculing the political leadership of this country, were never uttered in public media. That makes Youssef shocking, and intolerable according to older forms of decorum, as well as funny. Youssef said the interrogation was polite, but he could still be brought to trial and the very act of bringing him in is the latest in a series of blunders by the government.

Journalist or activist?

But I think the problem is even broader as CPJ's Joel Simon discovered when he visited Cairo in early March "to assess conditions and plan our (CPJ) our advocacy." He headed up his 'Mission Journal' blog with a title that asked "Who is a journalist in Egypt?" Simon met with over a dozen Egyptian journalists, and the ones he quotes are all well known as opposition activists be they print journalists or political talk show hosts. And the ones he quoted all insisted to greater or lesser degree that they were openly activists as well as journalists and, as journalists they said that is the way it should be. The same point was more or less made by two important Egyptian journalists and a media scholar discussing Egyptian media.

Simon, whose sympathies are always with journalists being treated as targets sounded somewhat dismayed. "The inability to draw a line between journalism and activism" he wrote "has significant implications, not only in Egypt but throughout the Middle East...One of our (the CPJ's) biggest challenges was agreeing on who we should help and defend...If it has gotten to a point where mainstream journalists in Egypt no longer make a distinction between journalism and activism, then the boundaries are blurring so quickly they may soon be impossible to discern." Coercing journalists with a political agenda

Fahmi Howeidi, an independent moderate Islamist –moderate enough to be published in the state newspaper Al-Ahram during the Mubarak years and now writing for Al-Sharouk, which is probably the least activist of the pro - Opposition independent newspapers, charged that many journalists are being coerced into slandering and vilifying the MB –its leaders and members. He claims they are being coerced by their superiors under orders from the owners, in a systematic campaign to defame and bring down the government. In less dramatic terms, journalists who have taken AUC's Adham Center professional training course, say they are prevented by their editors from applying ethical standards of

But in fairness the problem of partisanship in the reporting of news goes beyond the Opposition –it is also found in the sensationalism and vilification of the Opposition to be found in Al-Hurriyya wa al-Adala , the daily newspaper published by the MB's ruling Freedom and Justice party, and other pro- FJP publications. Not to mention some virulent TV Salafi sheikhs.

A sociologist's view

I ran this all past a few friends. Saad el-Din Ibrahim, the brilliant sociologist turned human rights activist, who had publically opposed Mursi in both rounds of the Presidential election, said that probably about 70 percent of all Egyptian journalists, in print or broadcast media, were opposed in principle to the Muslim Brotherhood and by nature, tending to the liberal Left. He sees lawlessness in society and irresponsibility in the media as the down side of something positive –that the Egyptians are no longer afraid. Abdul Moneim Said, former chairman of the board at Al-Ahram, and columnist (and a victim of the discrete but widespread purge of state media initiated by the MB dominated Shura Council), and now chairman of the Board of Egypt's leading independent newspaper, Masry al-Youm, goes a step further. Just about all Egyptian journalists, he believes, are now politicized, largely by choice but also having to yield to pressure, be they against the government, or for it, or on either side for the sake of professional survival. AUC's Hussein Amin, who is the dean of mass media studies in Egypt, told me that when he offers an alternative model of the press - one in which reporting and opinion are separated - some of his students object. They have never known and cannot conceive of such a press.

This is not a new problem. The model of a partisan press in which reporting is openly inspired by one's opinion, imported so-to-speak, into the region from France, has characterized most Arab print media since its emergence in the late 19th century. It is an old story. But here in Cairo the problem has become extreme.

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